Brightening the Covenant Chain

Shining a light on the power of Indigenous diplomacy

There is a concerted effort in various Western countries, notably the United States, Canada, Finland, Australia, and New Zealand, for governments to better recognize the voices and rights of Indigenous peoples. While these geographically separate peoples have diverse and contrasting histories, their historical experiences have common themes, including colonization, dispossession, and systemic disadvantage. A group of researchers based at the University of Hull in the UK is fostering new perspectives that hold promise to strengthen future intercultural relations that recognize deep histories of Indigenous diplomacy.

The Treatied Spaces Research Group is a collaborative team led by Joy Porter, Professor of Indigenous and Environmental History, and Dr Charles Prior, Head of the School of Humanities. The group works across disciplines, sectors, and international contexts to make treaties and environmental concerns central to education, policy, and public understanding.

One of its current projects is Brightening the Covenant Chain (BTCC, Arts & Humanities Research Council, AH/T006099/1). It focuses on historical North America but has globally significant implications. It explores cultures of diplomacy between the British Crown and the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy – a historically dominant and influential group of Indigenous peoples in Northeastern America, consisting of Six Nations: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora.

The project analyses one of the oldest diplomatic relationships in the world, the relationship between the British Crown and the Indigenous peoples of Canada and North America. This established a fundamental kinship relationship between the Haudenosaunee and the British Royal Family, one that continues to be ‘brightened’ or renewed in diplomatic terms today.

Telling a different story

Any casual study of the intercultural relationships between the Indigenous peoples of North America and British settlers is invariably drawn to differences that resulted in disputes and violence. However, on closer examination, the interaction also involved the exchange of ideas and the forging of alliances, which required diplomacy and respect for differing traditions concerning the nature of treaties, rights to movement, use of resources, and the nature of borders. Through the BTCC project, the Treatied Spaces Research Group is unveiling a rich, multi-layered picture of the social and cultural interplay between the Haudenosaunee and their European neighbours. This picture tells a different story from the more usual narrative in which Indigenous peoples lack agency or diplomatic power.

One of the BTCC resource outputs captures this perspective – an interactive map developed in conjunction with King’s College Digital Lab. It draws on a bespoke database built from thousands of geo-rectified data points collected from British Library historical maps to reveal how the political and intercultural landscape of the American Northeast changed over 330 years. The result is a dynamic representation of Haudenosaunee nations and settlers negotiating and re-negotiating access to space and resources. Homelands, peoples, and
Indigenous treaties struck with the Crown are sacred covenants that retain their power to direct how finite resources should be shared today.

Based on the group’s research, what future directions do you suggest for policy-making or legal frameworks to address and rectify historical injustices faced by Indigenous peoples?

Professor Joy Porter: The movement for Indigenous rights is far more complex than one, where many diverse groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, individuals, communities, and leaders are working to advance unending discussions and respect agreements over control of land and resources, and required of British leadership that they learn and engage with Haudenosaunee diplomatic pathways, including their legal and cultural norms and spiritual practices.

According to Porter, Indigenous treaties struck with the Crown are sacred covenants that retain their power to direct how finite resources should be shared today. She points to the Treaty of Niagara in 1764, a political crossroads at the creation of Canada as a nation-state that enshrined Indigenous sovereignty. Although not currently recognised by the Government of Canada because it was recorded via Indigenous wampum, the Niagara alliance with the English led to intercultural acceptance of the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Canada’s founding Crown to protect ‘Indian Country’ and regulate trade. It also extended a long-established British Haudenosaunee Covenant Chain alliance treaty relationship that originated in the early 17th century.

Porter calls for a return to the intercultural respect for Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous governance that was enshrined in the Treaty of Niagara 1764 and Royal Proclamation of 1763. Treaties, she argues, enabled diverse cultures to establish shared norms and languages and facilitated an ‘overlapping consensus’. Haudenosaunee women, for example, how small nations can continue to grow in the 21st century and for how larger settler nations can develop multicultural statehood.

Historical treaties, contemporary challenges

The work of the Treaded Spaces Research Group emphasises the centrality of treaties in Indigenous nation-building. They call for a renewed focus on Indigenous diplomacy, and cultural practices to advance understanding of the challenges being faced by Indigenous communities. Through their ongoing research programmes of publication, digital storytelling, museum exhibitions, artists’ residencies, and timely intercultural collaboration with the power relations between Indigenous actors and the world’s most pressing environmental challenges, the group is fostering a deeper appreciation of Indigenous agency across time and into the future.

Personal response

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